

Supporting Human Rights and Democracy
The U.S. Record 2006
Philippines

The Republic of the Philippines, with a population of 87 million, is a democracy with an elected president, an elected bicameral legislature, and a multiparty system. The May 2004 national elections for president and both houses of congress continued to be a source of contention, with unsuccessful attempts in 2005 and during the year to impeach the president on grounds of alleged election fraud. The government generally respected the human rights of its citizens; however, there were serious problems in certain areas. Some elements of the security forces were apparently responsible for extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and arbitrary arrest and detention. Members of the security services committed acts of physical and psychological abuse on suspects and detainees, and there were instances of torture. Corruption remained a problem in all sectors of the criminal justice system, including police, prosecutorial, and judicial organs.

US Government efforts to promote human rights and democracy in the Philippines were numerous and broad-based. The United States focused on building respect for human rights in the security forces, strengthening civil society and promoting rule of law, including transparency, in the judiciary and government. Strengthening democracy continued as an essential US goal.

A US Government grant assisted Philippine NGOs in promoting voter education and training election monitors. The grant also supported an electoral modernization program of the Philippine Commission on Elections in preparation for May 2007 national and local elections. Programs at both the local and national level promoted equity, transparency, and popular participation – all key factors for the healthy functioning of a democracy.

Improving the quality of media reporting was also a US priority. The media was generally free and electronic and print media were numerous. However, reporting often fell short of accepted journalistic standards. During the year the US Government sent several young journalists to the United States as participants in International Visitor Leadership Programs with the intention of enhancing their knowledge and understanding of American life and the US media. An American expert, sponsored by the United States, spoke on public relations, the Internet, and blogging. His audience was comprised of individuals

actively engaged in the growing community of political and public affairs bloggers. During the year new publications produced by the State International Information Programs office, including, "Media Emerging," and "Handbook of Independent Journalism," were widely distributed to journalists and editors across the country by representatives of the US Government.

Support for NGOs and civil participation in the processes of government were the foci of the US-funded Transparent and Accountable Governance Program. This program was active at local and national levels to promote better governance, increase public participation through conferences and other public forums, and reduce opportunities for corruption. Among other activities at the national level, the program supported implementation of the new procurement law by training NGO volunteers to observe procurements carried out by bids and awards committees and established a system for reporting irregularities to the Office of the Ombudsman. At the local level the program assisted 16 city governments to implement a range of anti-corruption and good governance reforms. From 2002 through the current year, the program also assisted 98 municipalities in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao and adjacent conflict-affected areas to reform and increase citizen participation in their budgeting and planning processes.

The US-funded Rule of Law Effectiveness Program supported the Philippine Government's effort to make corruption a high risk, low reward activity by providing assistance to several Philippine judicial court systems including the Anti-Graft Court, and the Court of Tax Appeals. Assistance directed toward two of the courts included training and the installation of case management systems designed to make the disposition of cases more efficient and effective. This program also supported assessments of selected government agencies for their vulnerability to corruption. A separate but complementary Threshold Country Program under the US Millennium Challenge Account focused on countering corruption by providing assistance to the Office of the Ombudsman, the Bureau of Internal Revenue, and the Bureau of Customs.

To encourage respect for due process and anti-corruption among members of the Philippine National Police and other law enforcement agencies, the United States sent approximately 111 law enforcement officials to the International Law Enforcement Academy in Bangkok for courses with human rights, ethics, rule of law, leadership, and anti-corruption components. In addition, US law enforcement agencies

conducted in-country seminars and training on ethics, human rights, anti-corruption, jail management, and US law enforcement standards for personnel from the Philippine National Police, National Bureau of Investigations, Office of the Ombudsman, Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency, Bureau of Immigration, and the Armed Forces. Training included a visit to the FBI's National Academy in Virginia. Under a new program a US-funded Senior Law Enforcement Advisor and his staff provided assistance to the Philippine National Police force's transformational program to devise and implement reforms that will make the Philippine National Police a more transparent, modern, and effective institution. This included cooperation with the police force's Task Force Usig, created in May to investigate allegations of unlawful and extrajudicial killings.

US assistance helped institutionalize alternative dispute resolution systems and improved judicial transparency and case management in the courts. At the community level, the Barangay Justice Program worked in some 800 barangays (precincts) in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, enabling marginalized individuals and groups to obtain redress for grievances and settle disputes. As a result, community disputes were resolved more rapidly. Support for alternative dispute resolution in the courts also led to the referral of more than 22,000 cases to mediation during the year. Since court-referred mediation was introduced with US support in 2001, the country's court backlog has steadily declined.

United States officials continued to coordinate closely with the Philippine Commission on Human Rights, an independent government agency tasked to monitor and investigate alleged human rights abuses, in the vetting of all military and police officials attending training funded by the USG, as required by the Leahy Amendments.

The International Military Education and Training Program continued to strengthen the professionalism, commitment to human rights, discipline, and technical expertise of the Philippine military. The program was an important component of US Government efforts to professionalize the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Graduates of the program populated top armed forces ranks, which actively supported close and professional US and Philippine military-to-military relationships. During the year these senior leaders continued to support constitutional processes and civilian control over the military, despite efforts by some members of the armed forces to stage a coup d'etat in February. The army participated in the United States Defense Institute of International Legal Studies program at all officer levels in

order to inculcate adherence to the rule of law. The Philippine Defense Reform initiative, with funding assistance from the United States, continued to work to make the Philippine armed forces more transparent and professional. A major strategic benefit of the initiative was the reinforcement of civilian authority over the military, thereby strengthening the overall stability of the Philippine Government.

A US Government program for women provided education and skill-building activities for survivors of prostitution. Another project addressed the needs and concerns of female migrant workers, especially the U.S. record 2006 those who were victims of trafficking or exploitation in Japan, and their Japanese-Filipino children. A third program focused on women serving as advocates for peace to resolve conflicts in Mindanao.

The Philippine Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. Muslims comprise a significant religious minority in the Philippines and historically have been victims of societal prejudice by the Christian majority. The US Government organized numerous public conferences and gatherings throughout the year to promote interfaith dialogue among Filipinos, making use of programming tools such as the US Speaker Program. Programs to foster interfaith dialogue included a citizen exchange program, which enabled 25 high school students and five young adult community activists, a mix of Muslims and Christians from Mindanao, to travel to Chicago for training on conflict resolution and interfaith dialogue. Also, the Youth Exchange and Study Program, funded by the US Government, brought 15 Muslim students to the United States to attend a full year of high school (school year 2006-2007) and live with American host families. These students learned about US society, developed leadership skills, and educated Americans on Philippine Muslim culture. In addition, US Government funded Democracy Grants were awarded to local NGOs to educate and mobilize communities for human rights protection and promotion; to engage grass roots anti-corruption activities; and to support efforts by Muslim women to attain political and economic empowerment. For the second year in a row, the United States sponsored an American imam's visit to the Philippines to discuss religious tolerance and diversity issues with large audiences of Muslims -- as well as Christians -- in Mindanao and elsewhere in the country. Another program gave Muslim college students and young professionals an opportunity to work as interns in the Philippine Congress. During the year the United States sent both Muslim and Christian leaders on International Visitors Leadership Programs to the United States. The programs covered a

wide range of topics aimed at the promotion of human rights and democracy; including grassroots activism, religion and the community, youth empowerment, the role and responsibility of a free press, leadership development for Muslim women, accountability in government and business, and community service and NGOs.

Trafficking in persons remains a serious problem in the country. Due to an improved record of prosecutions and convictions in cases handled by prosecutors trained by a US-funded program for Philippine prosecutors, enforcers, and social workers the situation has improved somewhat. Other US grants helped to create and strengthen mechanisms to combat trafficking at the local government level, provide preventive anti-trafficking education, and support public information campaigns. To strengthen worker rights, the United States continued to support a project to develop an early warning system aimed at preventing deterioration of labor standards compliance, and several other projects focused on combating the worst forms of child labor.

